



FINDING THE *Joy*

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It's 6:45 a.m. I'm slowly sipping my coffee, still trying to fully wake up. My seven-year-old is sitting next to me, painstakingly sounding out the words in her reader. "Where-is-To-om, say-s Da-ad." I'm holding my iPhone in my left hand, idly scrolling through Facebook. I'm reading an article titled "The Day My Hasidic Father Visited Me at Wellesley."

My daughter finishes her reader and moves on to her Hebrew reading. As I'm reading about yet another formerly Chassidic person who has left the world of Ultra-Orthodoxy behind, moving instead to the halls of Ivy League universities, my daughter is chanting ancient Hebrew words. It's the third article I've read in the last 24 hours written by a formerly religious person. One writes anonymously about his horrific childhood experiences, as the son of a beloved rabbi. One writes about his discovery of atheism and his psychedelic experiences and his subsequent enlightenment. I don't know whether the articles I read were untrue or sensationalized. I don't know these people, and I know that no society is immune from the weaknesses of human nature.

But where on social media are the writers who speak for me? Where are the people writing about living deeply meaningful lives as Chassidic Jews, as they grapple with the ordinary daily routine of life, as well as the additional challenge of clinging to an ancient truth in the most fast-paced

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society in the history of humanity? Not the angry people campaigning to overhaul the system. But the people in the box. Ordinary people. People like me.

My daughter is still next to me, now doing her math. Next to us on the table is a popular local home decor magazine that I bought in the hopes that it would provide me with the inspiration I need to buy new furniture. On top of the magazine is a *Siddur* and a book of *Tehillim*. The *Siddur* provides the abbreviated version of morning *davening* that I manage to say most days. I recite one chapter of *Tehillim* for each of my children. Say mine first, my three-year-old often begs.

All around my kitchen I see signs of an ancient world mixed into a 21st-century home. The calendar on my wall reads August-Menachem Av. A picture of the Rebbe leans against the window. I live in two parallel realities. On the one hand, I believe deeply and have dedicated my life to the teachings of Torah and Chassidus. This is my truth, my compass. It's why I live in Johannesburg, thousands of miles from my hometown of Seattle. On the other other hand, I'm venting on social media. I'm living a 21st-century lifestyle. It's not easy to fuse all the parts of our lives together. That's our job. That's our

tightrope. My life's mission. To make everything we do, including venting on social media, a way to find Hashem.

My father is a rabbi. My husband is a rabbi. On the surface my childhood was similar to the one I read about which in the author's mind was so tragic. I am also one of many children. I too was recognized by my last name. My home was full of guests and people praising my parents. But that's where it ends. My childhood was remarkably ordinary, filled with discovery, joy, friends and life. My childhood wasn't perfect. There is no such thing as a perfect childhood. But religion didn't make it worse—it made it better.

I was exposed to different ideas and people my whole life. I know Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*. I can talk

with anyone about almost anything including current events, political ideas or the structure of the electoral college. I may not be up to date with the latest news on pop culture or Hollywood scandal, but that's okay. In fact, I am proud of that. I choose to live the way I do. It's not because I don't know any other way. I do. But the world I was raised in is the world I deeply believe in and so I attempt to raise my own children similarly.

My faith in G-d shapes the many decisions I make daily. It's complicated, the delicate tightrope that we walk My challenge is to transmit to my children the beauty of our life, the meaning that we can find in everything, and to provide the space for them to make their own choices in life, while seeing and experiencing the joy and value in our life. My daughter had a sleepover recently. The mother phoned me. "My older daughter has a singing recital and your daughter wants to come."

Distracted with trying to get two little boys out the door, I told her it's fine with me if it's fine with her.

"It's absolutely fine with me, just..." she pauses, "some of the other girls will probably be singing secular songs."

I pause too. It's not something I want her exposed to, in a perfect world.

“It’s fine,” I respond. “Thanks for checking with me though.”

I make hundreds of these kinds of decisions a day. I sometimes wish I could lock up my children to shelter them from the absolute *shmutz* in the world around us. But the truth is, she’s already exposed. Let her go, see girls singing in an all-girls setting, and this can give me an opportunity to talk about the information we feed our brain. I don’t know for certain that it was the right choice. But I know I can’t keep her at home her whole childhood either.

Recently, we went on a vacation and there was a TV, which is something we don’t have in our home.

I figured I would let my kids watch some kids’ channels. There was only the Disney channel. Almost every show had kids disregarding parents, kids laughing when someone fell over and some tween romance. My kids were disappointed when I told them it wasn’t appropriate for them. We compromised and they watched people playing tennis.

I know some people think I am way too extreme. Some have even told me to my face. *You’re way too frum. You know you don’t have to have so many kids. And do you think G-d cares if you wear stockings? It’s more important to be nice.* (I agree with that, but kindness and stockings are not mutually exclusive.) Others think I am too lenient. *Ess past nisht* You are your letting kids do acrobatics?

I know I am far from perfect, but at least I believe that the best way to educate my children is to live what I teach. So I show them every day, in so many small ways, that even though I don’t always do everything exactly the way I should, every day I am trying to learn and grow, and be just that little bit better than yesterday.

I know that whatever walls I have around my house, fortified with electric fencing, there is nothing tall enough to keep the world away. Somehow, I need to show my kids that within this big, beautiful and crazy world that G-d made, there is G-dliness. We can somehow use everything in this world for the good.

I don’t think I have it all figured out.

I know I do things differently than my parents’ generation. Just writing on Facebook is something foreign.

“Don’t you think it’s TMI,” my mother laughs over the phone to me, while discussing something I wrote on social media. It’s hard to sometimes separate the cultural from the spiritual. But ultimately, I don’t think I am a fringe element. I’m not campaigning against the status quo. I don’t think my community is perfect, far from it.

But I believe deeply in its truth. At every moment and in every aspect of my life, from the mundane to the sublime, from the minutiae of *halachah* to the greatest faith and love of Hashem, all of it is really an opportunity to connect with our Creator. Somehow I need to show that beauty and truth to my kids.

I definitely don’t have all the answers and my children are still so little. So every day is a juggling act. How much to ask of them. When to say no. When to say yes. And when to just look away, pretending not to notice.

It’s 1:50 pm. I’m driving my daughter to her acrobatics lesson. A Jewish kids’ CD is playing. A child is singing, “Rebbe, all I am I owe to you...”

“Mommy,” I hear from the backseat, “I’m so happy Jacob Zuma won the vote.”

“Really?” I respond, “Why? Do you think he is doing a good job as president?”

“I think so,” she shrugs. A minute later. “Mommy?”

“Yes?”

“What’s the largest continent?”

Oy. I should know this. “Asia,” I tell her, only somewhat confidently.

“And the second biggest?”

I am not sure. I think it’s Africa. “I’m not sure,” I tell her, “I should know this. I’ll google it.”

“I should just ask Hashem,” she continues. A child of two worlds indeed. ❧



Temmi Hadar, born and raised on *shlichus* in Seattle, is now living about a million miles away in Johannesburg, South Africa. This is the third installment of her column, “Finding the Joy,” in which she ponders the meaning of life while perpetually sleep-deprived and attempting to juggle the roles of mother, wife, *shlucha*, teacher, writer and human being.